

ADVANCING STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO LITERARY TEXTS THROUGH THE USE OF LITERARY JOURNALS

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ABSTRACT

Reader-response theory has long been a growing influence in the literature classroom. The theory largely emphasizes the active and communicative role of the reader. Instead of looking at the meaning from within the text, the reader discovers meaning from within themselves, thus negotiates meaning from outside the text. Reader-response theory has evolved in the literature classroom through many practical applications such as role-play, drama, letter writing and literary journals. literary journals are normally adopted in the classroom with the aim of encouraging students to interact with the text and to draw individual responses from it thus moving steadily towards critical appreciation of the text. This study examined the use of literary journals in advancing literary responses among 65 undergraduate students taking English Literature courses at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. It relied on two types of analyses. Students' responses were coded and categorised using specific response categories to identify the kinds of responses elicited from the students' journals. To find out students' opinion regarding the use of literary journals in improving their responses to and understanding of literary texts, a structured, Likert-scale questionnaire was administered. Findings indicated that literary journals elicited a variety of literary responses from the students. In addition, students' positive feedback confirmed the viability of literary journals as a practical application tool in the literature classroom.

Introduction

In many literature classrooms both teachers and students are often denied the opportunity to have a "personal and authentic engagement" with a literary text as the teacher's main concern is to pass on one correct interpretation of the literary piece read and most students' worries centre on getting the right interpretation that matches that of the teacher's (Trousedale & Harris, 1993, p. 195). Due to this, perhaps, many

literature classrooms in Malaysia cannot be investigative in nature as students when asked, would prefer to keep their opinions to themselves for fear of not being able to provide the 'correct' interpretation of the text read. Another possible reason why some literature classrooms are unable to engage students in exploratory and engaging discussion of literary texts is most probably because "personal response to literature is limited to ... written response or oral discussion" (ibid, p. 196). Large scale studies to find out the relationship of reading and responding to literature support this. Findings suggest that when it comes to responding to literature, students are more concerned about learning 'academic' responses rather than giving their personal point of view (Purves, 1981) as in many traditional literature classroom settings, stress is placed on "formal response rather than personal meaning" (Newell, 1986).

Giving literary texts personal interpretation and meaning has become paramount in most literature classrooms as reader-response theory gains wide acceptance in most literature classrooms. As stated by Selden (1989, p. 132 as cited in Hirvela, 1996), "We can no longer talk about the meaning of a text without considering the reader's contribution to it." Reader-response theory asserts that the role that readers play in text interpretation is central and this belief has led to the utilisation of different tools to enable students to be more expressive and personal in writing their responses to literary texts. Such writings, as stated by Koay (1992, p. 2), turn responses "inwards" and makes reading "a springboard for associated links to personal experiences." A study carried out by Newell et al. (1986, p.25) substantiates the effectiveness of interpretation of texts through reader-based or personal writing tasks where findings reveal that such writing tasks "enabled students to be more fluent and more constructive with a wider range of response statements than were the formal responses."

One classroom activity that has been widely utilized in literature classrooms that is aimed at encouraging students to interact with the text and to draw individual responses from it is the keeping of literary journals. Literary logs or journals are a practical application of reader-response theory. Students are normally asked to make personal notes in their literary journals while reading a text. According to Benton and Fox (1985, p. 2-18), a reader responding to a text is engaged in four separate processes: anticipating/ retrospecting, picturing, interacting, and evaluating. Anticipating/retrospecting refers to guesses about what is going to happen in the text; picturing refers to images that come into the reader's mind; interacting refers to opinions on the elements found in the text; while evaluating refers to comments relating to the writer's skills. Cobine (1995) asserts that by keeping a literary journal, a written record of personal responses to literary texts, students read actively, and respond immediately and fully throughout their reading, not just at the end. Simpson (1986) observes that through literary response journals, students can write predictions

about plot, analyses of characters, insights about theme, or even appraisals of the author's technique.

The objective of this study is twofold. The first objective is to fill in a research gap. Despite the fact that literary journals may be utilised in local literature classrooms, not many studies have been conducted to identify the impact of journals on students' literary responses. One study was conducted by Ali (1994) who found that participants were encouraged to develop their responses and creative and critical thinking through writing journals since responses were generated in a non-threatening learning environment. Another study was conducted by Bharati (2004). Her study focused on eliciting student's responses through the use of guided journal writing. Her study revealed that journal writing enabled students to express their feelings and connect the text to their personal lives and reflect on the issues and concerns raised in the text. Despite these positive findings, there is a serious scarcity of such studies conducted. Thus, this study adds to the pool of knowledge on the impact of literary journals on students' literary responses.

The second objective is to explore the potential of literary journals in advancing students' responses. Many students taking English Literature courses in UPM have problems in expressing their opinions regarding the literary texts used in class. Some would give opinions when asked orally but most would merely keep to themselves. Another way for students to express their opinions is through writing. Unfortunately, in most cases, the structure of the courses offered often limits students' written responses. Other than tests, assignments and exams, students lack practice and lack the means to respond. In view of these perennial problems, the teacher is left with the daunting task of creating conducive conditions in which students are able to actively respond to literary texts. According to Malachi (2007), literature teachers' main concern should be on discovering students' personal responses to literary texts and this gives emphasis to the provision of activities that will increase students' interaction and responses to the text that they are reading. This study focused on identifying the kinds of responses elicited from the students' literary journals and on identifying students' perception about the use of literary journals in the literature classroom.

Reader Response Theory

A discussion of the application of the reader response theory is imperative in order to understand the use of literary journals in the classroom. The reader-response theory was conceptualized in the 1920s by I.A Richards who discussed emotional response towards literature. This concept was further advanced by D. W. Harding and L. Rosenblatt in the 1930s, and by the 1970s, with more rigorous emphasis given to the readers and their experience of the text in works by Norman Holland, Stanley

Fish, Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss, the reader-response influence in literary criticism became prominent.

Reader-response theory acknowledges the reader as an agent who plays the important role of assigning meaning and experiencing the text (Padley, 2006; Davis & Womack, 2002; Tompkins, 1980). It encompasses approaches and techniques that involve studying how readers respond to a literary work. Since it addresses the strategies adopted by readers of literary texts, the implication is that teachers must create better readers and allow for the possibility of more than one response to the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Reader-response theory has long been a growing influence in the literature classroom. The theory largely emphasizes the active and communicative role of the reader. The reader is no longer a passive reader who negotiates the meaning of the text as the author had intended. Instead of looking at the meaning from within the text, the reader discovers meaning from within themselves, thus negotiates meaning from outside the text. Stanley Fish (1970), in *Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics* argues that a literary work should not be seen as an object nor should it be described as one. Instead, a text should be seen as something that exists and signifies a meaning when it is read. Iser (1976) echoes the same notion when he argues that a text contains gaps that automatically install the reader as the active maker of meaning. Similarly, Holland (1975) says that reading enables readers to recreate the meaning of a story in their own style.

Reader-response theory has evolved in the literature classroom through practical applications. Hirvela (1996, p.133) proposes a change in the style of questioning the teacher should use, for example, instead of asking "What does the author mean?" the teacher should ask "How did you feel when reading?" Elliot (1990) uses role-play, drama, and letter writing together with texts. Oster (1989) suggests the task of rewriting narratives from a different character's point of view.

One popular method in deriving personal interpretations of a literature text is through the use of a literary journal. Keeping a reading log or a journal to write their feelings, ideas, opinions and interpretations may enable students to become actively involved in the learning process as through writing, students would not only be more aware of the process of responding to the text but they would also be "testing hypotheses and formulating and altering the meaning of the text for the reader" (ibid.) Such active learning would force students to ask questions that "demand not just recall but higher-level reasoning and predicting and sometimes demonstrating reflective reading and writing behaviour" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 42).

The implication for using literary journals in advancing students' responses is apparent. Through literary journals, students are encouraged to become active, communicative readers that are capable of negotiating meaning from outside the text. Through literary journal writing, neither the text nor the teacher is the sole source of meaning.

The Study

The methods used to teach literature shape students' method of reading and responding to the text. As such, there is a need to employ a method that will maximize students' engagement with the text. To this end, the literary journal was adopted as part of the coursework in literature courses.

This study examined the use of literary journals in advancing literary responses of undergraduate students taking literature courses at the Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication, UPM. It sought to investigate whether literary journals can enhance students' responses to and critical appreciation of texts introduced in the literature classroom. It also aimed to prove the viability of literary response journals as a practical tool in the literature classroom. Three research questions guided the study: 1) Is the use of literary journals effective in generating responses from students? 2) What kinds of literary responses are elicited through literary journals? 3) What are the students' perceptions of the use of literary journals in the literature classroom?

Research Methodology

Sample

The sample consisted of 65 students taking English literature courses namely BBL 3101 A Survey of Prose Forms and Poetry in English and BBL 3216 The Novel and Short Story in English, at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. They were asked to keep a literary journal throughout the course. After reading a literary text (in or outside of the classroom), students would write about the plot, characters, themes, the writer's style or any literary element they found intriguing. They could also make personal references in their responses. The journals were collected on a weekly basis. The teacher wrote comments and questions alongside each entry to highlight or imply a literary connection; refraining from marking grammatical or punctuation mistakes.

Instrumentation

To determine what kinds of literary responses were elicited from the students, a close and careful reading of the students' literary response journals was done by two raters who then coded the responses from the 30 literary journals, randomly chosen from a

set of 65. The responses were then isolated according to specific response categories based on the measure used by Newell et al (1986). The measure codes responses under six categories of response/statements.

The first category of statement is descriptive. Descriptive statements include literal retelling of the story. Other forms of descriptive statements include quotes and descriptions of aspects in which the story's form, language, characters, or setting is described. The second category of statement is personal reaction and this covers reactions to form and content. Reaction to form refers to statements in which the writer reacts to the world of the story as if it were not fictional. It includes moral appraisals or expressions of liking for specific characters, and personal statements of how people 'should' act while reaction to content refers to statements in which the writer reacts to the world of the story as if it were not fictional. The third category of responses is labelled as reflexive. Reflexive statements cover statements that reflect integration of the texts and writer's experiences and knowledge of the world through associations with their prior knowledge and events and characters in the text. Another form of reflexive statement is autobiographical narrative and these statements reflect the writer relating the story to personal facts or experience.

The fourth form of responses refers to interpretive statement. There are four types of interpretive statements and they are interpretation of form, interpretation of content through the reader, content based on the text and interpretation of the whole. The fifth category of response is evaluative. Evaluative statements cover evaluation of author's method, vision and emotional or aesthetic appeal. The last category is labelled under miscellaneous which covers statements such as off-task comparisons with other authors and unimportant metastatements.

To find out students' opinions regarding the use of literary response journals in improving their responses to and understanding of literary texts, a structured, Likert-scale questionnaire was designed to obtain information on the students' perceptions of literary journal writing. The questionnaire comprised 13 questions that measure the important aspects of students' experience in writing the journal. Items are measured on a five-point scale, indicating the amount of agreement or disagreement, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

Results and Discussion

Literary Journals as the Means to Elicit Responses

The six categories of literary responses examined represent the types of statements that the students made as they read and wrote. Table 1 represents the types of responses elicited from the students' journals.

Table 1: Types of statement

Type of statements	No. of responses	Percentage
1. Descriptive	322	33.1
2. Personal reaction	312	22.2
3. Reflexive	76	5.5
4. Interpretive	354	25.8
5. Evaluative	100	6.0
6. Miscellaneous	213	15.5
Total	1370	100

The distribution of percentages indicates that the students' responses were relatively distributed across the six categories, suggesting that journal writing allowed the students more scope in expressing their responses to the texts. About 33 percent of the statements were descriptive, 22 percent were personal reactions, and 25 percent were interpretive. The rather large percentage of descriptive statements which are considered as low level inferences was somewhat predicted as this was the students' first experience in responding to texts through literary journals. In addition, the students could have felt compelled to retell and describe the story to show their understanding of the text.

The findings above show that the use of literary journals is effective in generating a variety of responses from students ranging from low level inferences to the ones that reflect higher-level thinking where students not only interpret the text and form but also evaluate the methods and vision employed by the authors. Personal reaction makes up about 22 percent of the responses; indicating that the students were personally engaged with the texts and 25 percent of the statements were interpretive and evaluative, revealing that the students went beyond what can actually be found in the texts.

Through the use of literary journals, students were involved in active learning; students asked questions about what they had read, related the stories to their lives and carried out "inward" discussions on the 'how' and 'why' authors presented their stories in such a way. As stated by Carlisle (2000, p.13) reading logs or journal writing enables students to "develop their own individual responses" and assists them in gaining a better understanding of texts read, and these findings are evident in this study. A significant and positive outcome in students' involvement and participation in such a writing environment could be due to the shift in the role played by the audience i.e. the literature teacher. In a formal response environment, teachers play the role of examiners or determinants of correct interpretation but in an informal response environment, a student-teacher dialogue is promoted which permits "students to invite their reader into the explorations" of literary texts (Newell et al., 1986).

Students' Perception of Journal Writing

The value of Cronbach's Alpha based on the 13 items in the questionnaire is .924, indicating that the 13-item measure is a stable index of students' perceptions of writing a journal. Table 2 presents the items along with the mean scores.

Table 2: Students' perception of writing a journal

No.	Item	Mean
1	Writing a journal helps me to respond towards the text.	1.43
2	Writing a journal provides the means for me to respond to the text.	1.55
3	Writing a journal helps me to practice responding to the text.	1.55
4	Writing a journal helps me to be active in negotiating the possible meaning(s) of the text.	1.74
5	Writing a journal helps me to create my own meaning of the text.	1.72
6	Writing a journal helps me to interact with the text.	1.75
7	Writing a journal helps me to understand the text.	1.64
8	Writing a journal helps me to do well in the course and get a high grade.	2.30
9	Writing a journal helps me become critical of the text.	2.02
10	Writing a journal helps me to get information that is not covered in class.	2.09
11	Writing a journal helps me to practice writing literary essays.	1.78
12	Writing a journal gives me the opportunity to interact with the teacher.	1.77
13	Writing a journal should be part of the coursework for a literature course.	1.72

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that students highly valued the use of literary journals in the literature classroom. About 61.5 percent of the students strongly agreed that writing a journal helped them to respond to the text while 58.5 percent of the students agreed that writing a journal helped them to create their own meaning of the text. Students found that journal writing provided them with a platform to personally interact with the literary texts introduced in class. This enabled them to become active participants in the process of meaning making. From the findings, it was also revealed that students valued the kind of interaction that they developed with the teacher through the use of literary journals. Other significant findings include students' highly positive perception of the use of literary journals in helping them to become critical in their interpretation of the text and in getting information not covered in class.

It was also revealed that the mean score for item no. 8 (Writing a journal helps me to do well in the course and get a high grade) is quite high (mean= 2.30). This could be due to the awarding of 10% of the total mark for the course for journal writing. 36.5 percent of the students agreed that writing a journal helped them to do well in the course and get a high grade.

The results above suggest that students have positive perceptions towards the use of literary journals in the literature classroom as they found that the use of the journal has increased their participation in the learning process and helped them to discover meaning from within themselves.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is believed that the literary journal helps students to respond to the text, and is viable as a practical tool in literature classrooms. Many studies have confirmed this (Benton and Fox, 1985; Simpson, 1986; Newell et al., 1986; Ali, 1994; Cobine, 1995; Bharati, 2004). This study supports the findings, and confirms the advantages of using journals in advancing students' literary responses. The findings imply that journal writing generated a variety of personal responses from the students. They also show that the students preferred writing a journal to help them to respond to the texts; to create their own meaning of the text; and to do well in the course and get a high grade.

Through the findings of this study, one other evident discovery is the importance of including the voice of the students in the process of meaning making. Previously, students only listen to the voice of the literature teacher when it comes to interpreting and understanding the literary texts. This study shows that by giving them a voice through the use of literary journals, students become critical and autonomous in learning.

The implication of using literary journals in advancing students' responses is clear. Through literary journals, students are encouraged to interact with the text and to draw responses from it, thus moving steadily towards critical appreciation of the text. The researchers believe that writing literary journals should be part of the coursework for literature courses at tertiary level since the overall level of students' engagement in responding towards literary texts covered in class proved to be desirable. To encourage quality responses, it is recommended that marks allocated for journal writing be increased to a more deserving percentage befitting the amount of writing and effort put in by the students. There is however, a strong need to come up with a grading system that is valid and reliable due to the high subjectivity of responses received. Continuous writing in the journal would also ensure that students become dynamic and responsive readers.

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